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(Let's Keep Spies Out of the News Bureaus

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It's difficult to believe that Adm. Stansfield Turner, the director of the Central Intelligence Agency, is really as naive as he appeared the other day.

In Turner's view, expressed to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, there's nothing wrong with the CIA using foreign correspondents as covert intelligence agents under certain circumstances. "I don't understand it, I really don't," he said, when editors in the audience challenged his position. "You're saying that if you serve your country, you're no longer free."

In making that statement, Turner misses a number of critical points completely. Let us try to spell them out.

First of all, if any journalists are used as CIA agents abroad, all of them become suspect. How is anyone to make the distinction?

And since reporters overseas frequently go into potentially dangerous places like Iran or Afghanistan, the mere suspicion that they are spies places their lives in jeopardy—whether they're actually working for the CIA or not.

Furthermore, if no one can know which reporters are CIA agents and which are not, how can Americans be sure that the dispatches they are reading from Tehran or Moscow or Paris are anything more than CIA concoctions planted to accomplish the agency's objectives.

Americans can trust the information they get from U.S. journalists abroad precisely because these reporters have only one master—their newspaper or television network—which expects them to report honestly, objectively, fairly and, above all, without hidden motives.

Turner contends that journalists are valuable to the CIA because they can ask

questions without arousing suspicion, and because they usually have good sources in foreign governments. It's really astonishing to hear him say this, for he surely must realize that as soon as American journalists are even so much as suspected of being CIA agents, they will promptly lose their ability to ask questions without arousing suspicion. As for their good sources in foreign governments, either they will just as promptly dry up or, worse, they will attempt to use the journalist as a conduit for transmitting misinformation to the CIA.

Finally, there is the traditional and essential separation of journalists and government in the United States. Each serves a vital role in the American political and social system—but only when they remain separate. That separation is basic to the entire concept of free speech and a free press, which are fundamental to American society. When journalists work for the government, they cease to function as journalists and become—or appear to become, which is really just as bad—nothing more than apologists. When the CIA recruits journalists, it not only corrupts those individuals, but it corrupts the whole concept of a free American press.

At one point in his discussion with the editors, Turner argued that "a lot of correspondents are patriotic enough" to work for the CIA.

Patriotism is sometimes a more complicated concept than it seems. We hope that correspondents are patriotic enough not to go to work for the CIA, and to understand the harm they would do to their own integrity, to their colleagues and to their country if they tried to be journalists and CIA spies at the same time.

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